

DC History Ch. 4

The Look & Life of the City
1820 - 1860

The Look and Life of the City, 1820–1860

Main Ideas in This Chapter

1. People had different opinions about Washington City. As today, some were very critical of the nation's capital.
2. The percentage of free black people to slaves rose dramatically during this period.
3. Many lifestyles existed in Washington side by side.
4. Social and cultural institutions developed.
5. As the city grew, people began to associate themselves with their neighborhoods.

• How did travelers reach Washington City in the early 1800s?

• What sights did visitors to the capital see when they got to the city?

SUMMARY

Visitors to Washington before 1860 left vivid descriptions of what they saw. Many foreigners thought the city crude and unfinished. They were impressed by some of the public buildings but not by the modest rows of dwellings and the wide, ungraded streets. Visitors commented on the numbers of black people in the city, curious customs such as tobacco chewing, facilities for shopping, and the tourist sights. They left both favorable and unfavorable impressions of the capital.

The people who lived in Washington were a great mixture. Two major racial groups, white and black, lived close together, yet the circumstances of their lives were quite different. White people as a group held positions of power and prestige, while African Americans in general had few advantages. In both white and free black society, elite groups, middle classes, and laboring classes had their diverse incomes and lifestyles. The number of slaves was diminishing as a percentage of the total African American population in the city.

Washington's population grew from just over 13,000 to more than 61,000 by 1860. People continued to expand old neighborhoods but new residential areas attracted settlers, especially in the section between the Capitol and the White House. Foggy Bottom, near the Potomac River, and Uniontown, or Anacostia, on the east bank of the Anacostia River, began to grow. A great variety of institutions—churches and charitable institutions, public and private schools, colleges, theaters, and recreational and sporting facilities—added richness and depth to Washington's social and cultural life. The Smithsonian Institution was chartered in 1846. In every way, the unfinished city became more finished during the decades between 1820 and 1860.

1. A Visit to the Capital

First Impressions

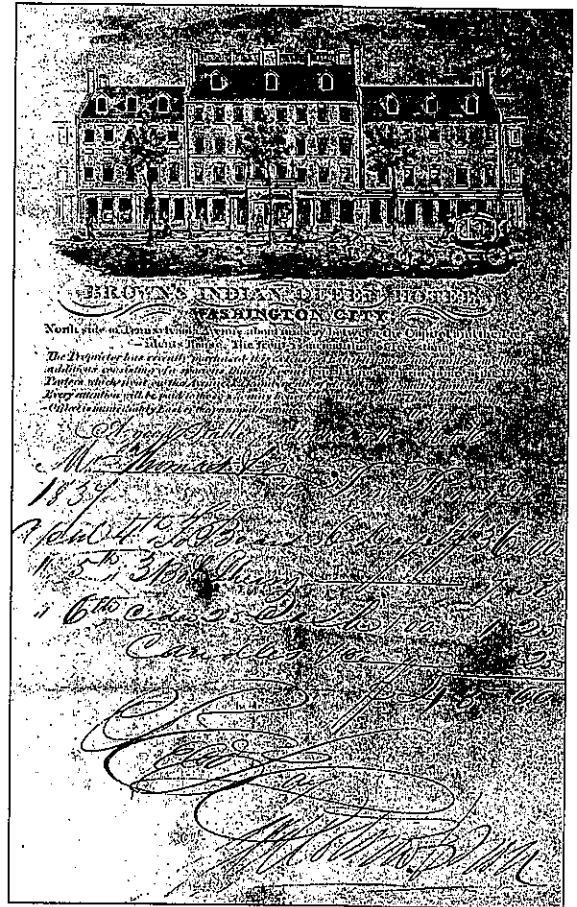
Many travelers, American as well as foreign, made a point of coming to Washington to see the capital of the United States for themselves. They did not want to miss America's attempt to build a capital from scratch. Most visitors wanted to judge how well the

young republic was living up to its ideals by seeing firsthand how its planned capital was developing.

Many travelers found getting to Washington the most difficult part of the visit. The roads to the city were full of ruts and rocks and mudholes. After 1835, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad connected Washington with Baltimore. The ride was smoother than by stagecoach, but it was also dirtier for dust, and soot-coated passengers who chose to ride in the open cars pulled by a smoke-belching locomotive. When the train reached Washington's city limits, according to regulations, the locomotive had to be detached. Until 1852 passenger cars had to be pulled by horses into Washington City. More fortunate travelers came by steamboat, landing at Potomac wharves in southwest Washington.

A traveler's first impression of the capital city was likely to be the strongest. The Capitol and the White House, gleaming white upon their hills, stood above the "scattered, unfinished red-brick town" that spread around them. William Chambers, who came in 1854, was favorably impressed. He saw a city consisting "of a number of streets lined with continuous rows of houses, several fine public buildings, and a fair show of stores and hotels." It was still "the City of Magnificent Intentions," as the English writer Charles Dickens had called it in 1842, and it was improving.

After arriving in Washington, visitors were usually brought by hackney-coach or omnibus to one of the several hotels on Pennsylvania Avenue. The traveler's choice might be the Indian Queen, a rambling structure on the north side of the avenue just west of 6th Street, or the National Hotel across 6th Street. In the hotel, the visitor learned some of the customs of the capital: the boy who



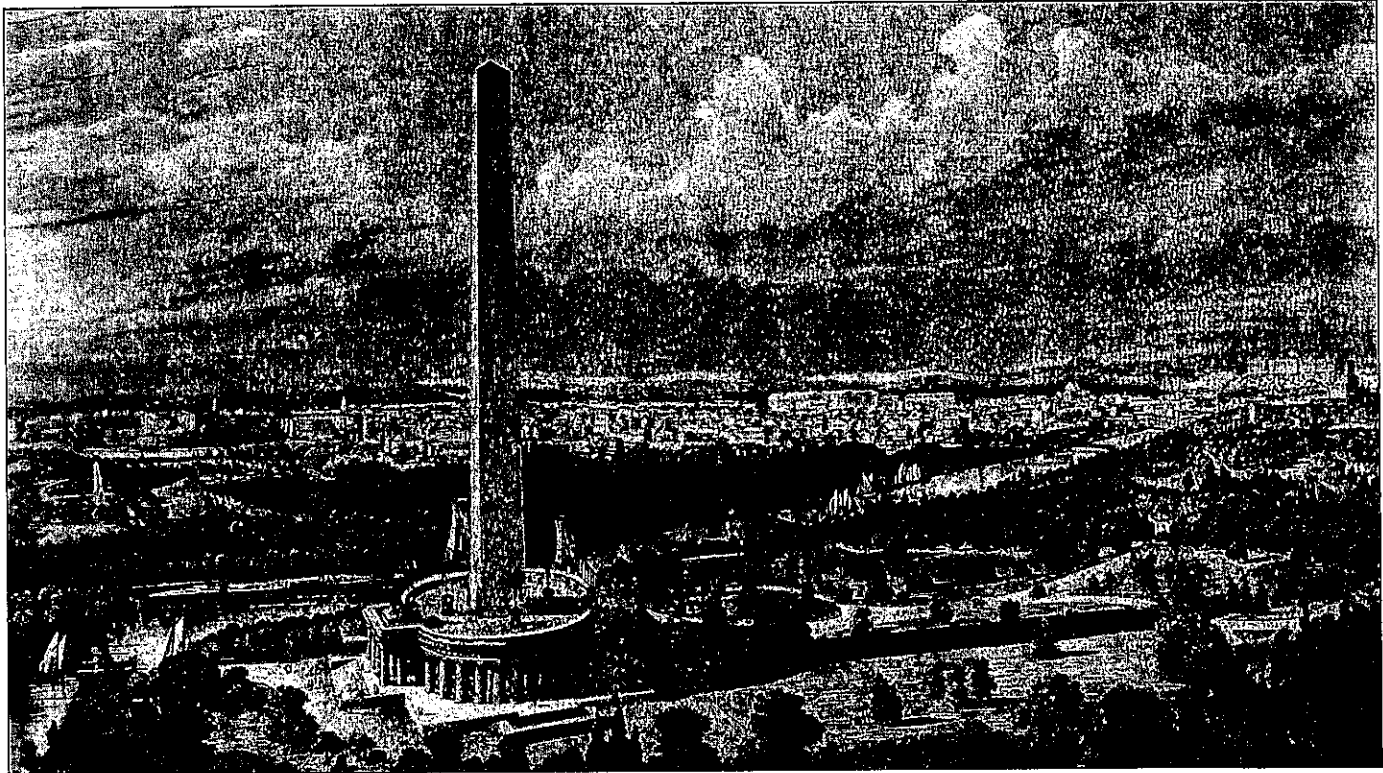
A bill from Brown's Indian Queen Hotel, Washington's most famous hostelry in the 1830s and 1840s

- Where was the hotel located?
- Why was its location important?



The City Hotel, later known as Willard's Hotel, was located at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. The White House is on the left. The name "Willard" has been an important one in the hotel business in Washington since 1847.

- Where is the current Willard Hotel?
- What is important about that building?



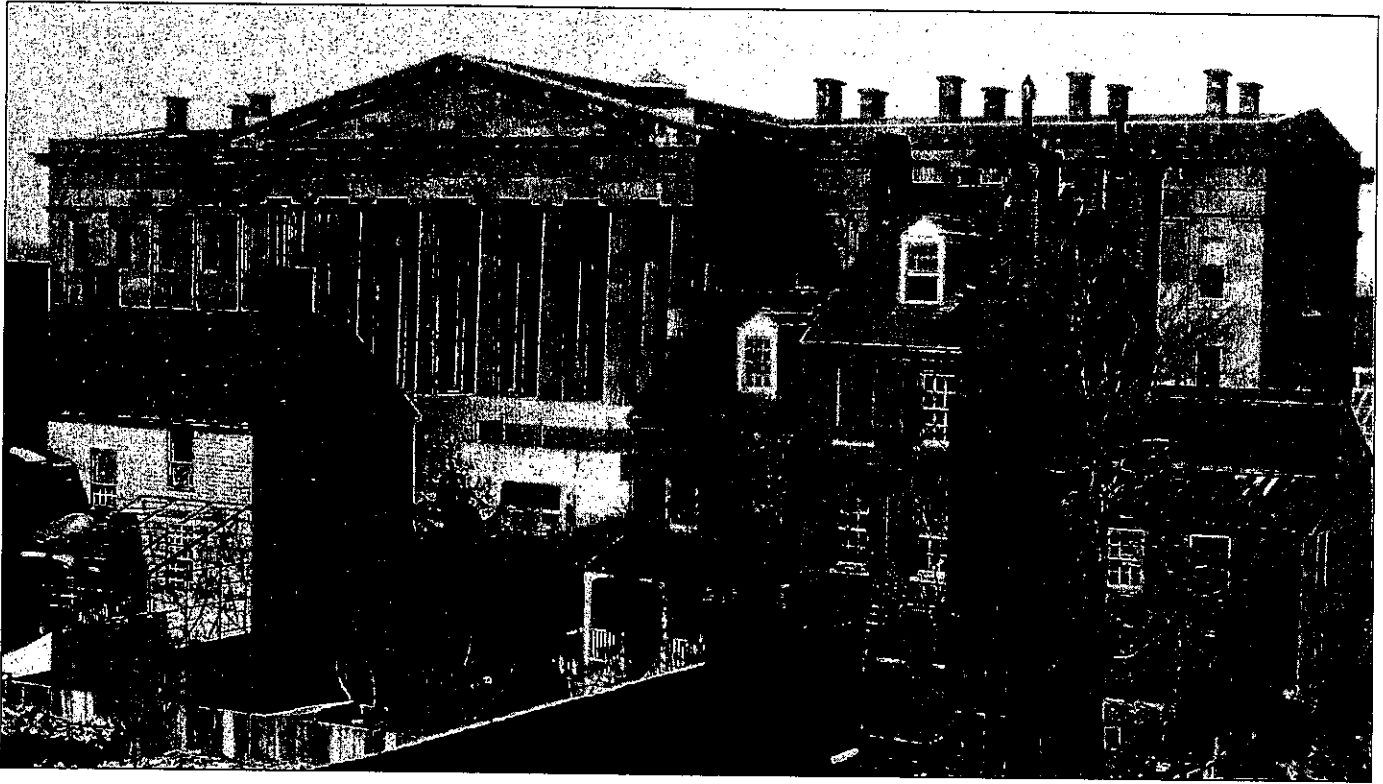
Sometimes artists presented the nation's capital as they thought it should look. In this view, the Washington Canal is full of ships.

- *What is strange about the Washington Monument in this picture?*
- *Why would artists draw idealized views of the city?*

came to get his bags, the waiter in the hotel dining room, the woman who cleaned the bedroom—all were African American.

Early Washington hotels usually consisted of row houses joined together. Most bedrooms were small, crowded, and awkwardly arranged. People frequently slept two to a bed (sometimes more than two!) and privacy was rare. Meals were scenes of mass confusion: a bell rang and people rushed to take their seats at long tables. With loud sounds of chewing and little conversation, everyone gulped down the heavy food. Men often then adjourned to the barroom to smoke or chew tobacco and drink brandy. Women in some hotels could enjoy the ladies' parlor, which was less coarse than other public rooms. Looking out to the rear of the hotel into the "common yard," a visitor could view much interesting business:

Clothes are drying in the same yard; female slaves with cotton handkerchiefs twisted round their heads, are running to and fro on the hotel business; black waiters cross and recross with dishes in their hands; two great dogs are playing upon a mound of loose bricks . . . ; a pig is turning up his stomach to the sun, and grunting "that's comfortable!" and neither the men, nor the women, nor the dogs, nor the pig, nor any created creature takes the smallest notice of the triangle [to summon servants], which is tingling madly all the time (from *American Notes*, by Charles Dickens, 1842).



Seeing the Sights

After a night's sleep, the traveler of the 1830s or 1840s stepped out to take in the sights of the city. If Congress were in session, a first stop could be the Capitol. Many sights might catch the traveler's eye as he moved down wide, tree-lined Pennsylvania Avenue toward Capitol Hill. Hotels and boardinghouses, their front steps crowded with people "sunning themselves, and talking idly together," occupied the Avenue's north side. Shops of many sorts took up the ground floors of other buildings. These shops included those of a chairmaker, Mr. Wilson; an auctioneer, Mr. Poor; a saddler, Mr. Polkinghorn; and a druggist, Dr. Todd, as well as two or three merchants, a printer's shop, and Mr. Keyworth's "splendid establishment of jewelry." The only things missing from the scene were the transport wagons and factories common in other cities.

One of the busiest places on the Avenue was Center Market, the city's most concentrated area for shopping. This group of rambling sheds and buildings stood on the south side of Pennsylvania Avenue where the National Archives is today. In the morning it swarmed with people, some selling their meats and produce, others buying. Since these were the days before refrigeration and canned foods, most people shopped every day for food. Center

Visitors to the city often went to the National Institute, housed in the Patent Office. The collection contained such rare items as George Washington's sword and camp equipment, the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin's printing press, and "locks of the hair of all the Presidents of the United States."

•What museums are in the Patent Office building now?

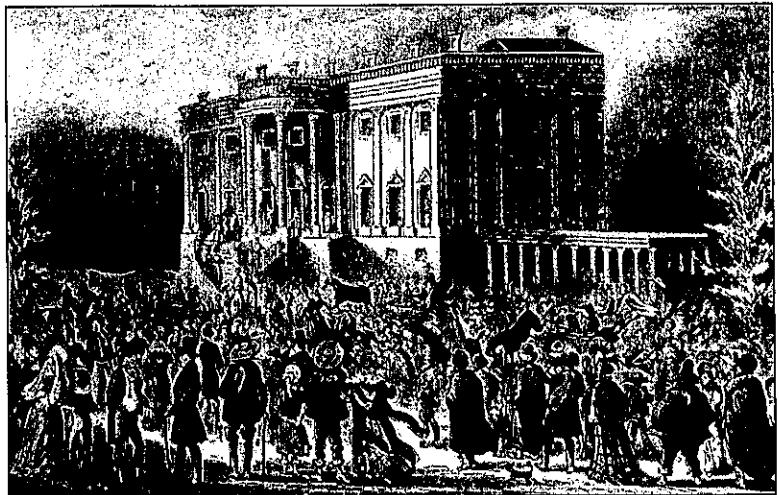
Market was one place where all kinds of people—black and white, rich and poor, senators and average citizens—came together.

Travelers might hear the cries of vendors or shoppers bargaining: "Will you buy some bread this morning? Here's some, very nice. How do you sell it? Six cents, take two?" Visitors could smell the fish market in the rear of Center Market. They might also catch the odor of the Washington Canal which, in one person's opinion, was "a little, dirty, drib[b]ling pool of foetid water, only a few inches deep." By 1830 this grand waterway, planned by L'Enfant, had failed to realize expectations.

Visitors to Washington usually took in such sights as the Smithsonian, on the "Island" south of the Washington Canal. Construction on the Smithsonian Institution building began in 1847. Another curiosity, the Washington Monument, was under construction intermittently from 1848 to 1885. The Patent Office was also a frequent stop for many visitors. Begun in 1836, it housed an "immense number of [patent] models" and the beginnings of a national museum.

The U.S. Capitol and the White House

The U.S. Capitol was a welcome sight to those making the trip down Pennsylvania Avenue. It seemed as beautiful as the town below it seemed incomplete. The hill on which it stood was covered with trees and lawns. The building struck visitors as being "imposing" in size and in its "exquisite whiteness." The U.S. Capitol became even more "stupendous," as one writer put it, by enlargements begun in 1851. Inside the building, visitors could see



Anybody who wished to could attend a presidential party, or levee.

John Trumbull's four immense history paintings and various statues. For a time, a larger-than-life-size statue of George Washington stood in the Capitol. Horatio Greenough, the sculptor, had portrayed Washington in the style of ancient Rome. The statue of the half-clothed hero offended many visitors and was eventually removed. It can now be seen at the National Museum of American History.

Local residents and visitors came to the Capitol to watch Congress in action. Young ladies delighted in coming to the gallery to hear a representative or senator give a stirring oration. Frances Anne Butler, an English-born visitor, reported listening to Daniel Webster speak when, with "a tremendous bustle, and waving of feathers, and rustling of silks, in [came] streaming a reinforcement of political beauties." Congressmen entertained and amazed the visitors. Some of them sat with their feet propped up on their desks, passing the time by "spitting [tobacco] to excess." Tobacco-chewing legislators missed their spittoons so often that Charles Dickens advised "all strangers not to look at the floor; and if they happen to drop anything, though it be their purse, not to pick it up with an ungloved hand on any account." Despite its informality, Congress contained some of the greatest speakers, political leaders, and learned minds in the United States. These men were well worth seeing and hearing.

When they went to the White House, foreign visitors learned that not only could they visit the mansion, but they could meet the president without any bother. A visitor might send in his visiting card, or attend a presidential *levee*, a public visiting day and reception at the White House. "Every human being has a right to present himself there," wrote Frances Butler in amazement. And just about every sort of person came to these public days. "Great numbers of the very commonest sort of people used to rush in," Butler wrote with shock. In England the common people did not mix with refined people of high social standing. White House *levees*, some observers said, were perfect examples of America's democratic politics and society.

2. The People of Washington

A Mixed Society

Some visitors watched and wrote about the people who lived in Washington City between 1820 and 1860. The chief character-

istic of the city's population, several said, was its variety. This was especially true when Congress was in session, from December to May. Then the city filled up with people from all the states; one visitor described them as "the burly backwoodsman, the genuine Sam Slick, the polished Bostonian, the staid and prim Philadelphian, the wealthy manufacturer, the energetic farmer, and the languid but uncertain planter." "Indians of different tribes, coming and going on deputations," were also part of what must have been a diverse and colorful mixture.

The year-round population, the settled residents, added considerably to this racial, economic, and social mix. Although white and black Washingtonians rubbed shoulders at work, in residential areas, on the streets, and at such gatherings as presidential levees, parades, or circuses, clear lines were drawn between the races.

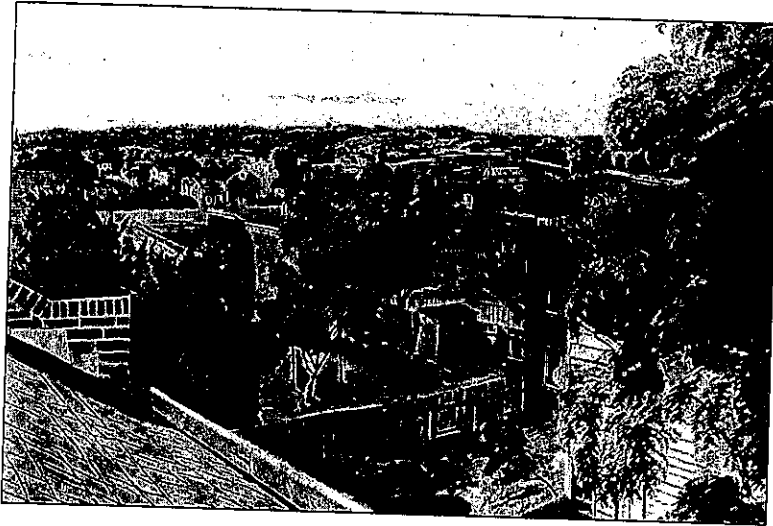
Washingtonians were also divided according to their classes. On top of white society were the elite, called "the better sort." Businessmen, government employees, and some professionals comprised the larger middle class. Beneath the middle class was the laboring class of white workers who toiled with their hands. Some members of this class were very poor. A person's class depended largely on two circumstances—income or wealth and the kind of job he or she performed.

A similar social ladder existed within African American Washington in the years before the Civil War. A small elite of educators, religious leaders, and community decision-makers occupied the top level of African American society. A free black middle class included those who had earned or inherited property and a few business people and professionals. Below the middle class were free black laborers who owned little or no property and were often destitute. Finally, there were the slaves, whose numbers were diminishing in Washington.

Washington's Elite

At the top of Washington's social order were members of old city families, a few high officials of the federal government, and ministers or representatives of foreign governments. The Carroll, Brent, Tingey, Van Ness, Seaton, and Smith families produced leaders of city politics, society, and **philanthropy** year after year. The British ambassador always belonged to this small circle. Those few congressmen who brought their families with them to the capital also

- *Who were Washington's elite?*
- *What were their lives like?*



A view of Washington's skyline looking northwest from "Franklin Row," K Street between 12th and 13th Streets, NW, drawn by Montgomery Meigs in 1850

belonged to this elite group, as did the families of such officials as the Commandant of the Navy Yard, Supreme Court justices, secretaries of the Cabinet departments, and high military officers.

The elite lived in tall brick houses around the White House and along F Street. Some had country houses north and south beyond the city limits in Washington County. Others owned country estates across the Potomac in Alexandria County. In some cases the names, or even the buildings, of these old estates have survived; for example, there was "Friendship," an estate in northwest Washington near the site of American University today; "Rose-dale," which remains today on Newark Street in Cleveland Park; and "Arlington," now the Custis-Lee mansion overlooking the Potomac in Virginia.

When Congress was in session the elite kept busy with visits to one another's "mornings" (early parties), "drawing-room" evenings, and "assemblies" (dancing parties at night). These gatherings, as one visitor noted, were "very ceremonious and exclusive." A card delivered at one's home was an invitation to tea or to an assembly. It was impolite to reject such an invitation and equally bad to attend without having been "carded." At a "drawing room," which usually began at about five o'clock in the afternoon, one dressed up in high style, chatted, and consumed cakes, coffee, punch, and ice cream. An "assembly" was similar to a drawing room, but with dancing added: "a rollicking country dance," a quadrille, a basket dance, and a cheat. Guests left at nine o'clock, fearful of losing their way on the dark city streets.

The memoirs of Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, published in 1906, are an excellent source of material about life in the city.

- What does this letter to her sister tell us about social life among Washington's white elite before the Civil War?
- Most of the men she mentions were government officials, and most of the women were their wives. How do you think these relationships have changed over the years?

Last week I went in to pay some necessary visits and dined at Mrs. Thornton's. After dinner I sent for Brother and after passing the twilight hour with Mrs. Bourdeaux and Thornton, I took him with me to Mrs. Johnson's—this little woman improves exceedingly on acquaintance. I tell her she is too good for a mere fashionable lady and I believe her heart tells her so too, for since the birth of her son, she does not go into half as much into company as she used to do.

The next evening I was engaged at a large and splendid party at Mr. Wirt's, and as Mrs. Clay said etiquette allowed of my so doing I asked brother to go along and appointed him to meet me at Mrs. Clay's at 7 o'clock. The next evening I went in, Ann with me and Mrs. C. and party waited until near 8 for brother.—As he did not come, she told me I had best call for him at the President's where he dined. I did so, but he had just left the house. Mr. Clay had left word for him to follow us and I was afraid he would not, but staid in the reception room waiting for him and soon saw his face through the crowd and making my way found him and introduced him to Mr. and Mrs. Wirt, and kept his arm through the evening introducing him to all my acquaintances. It was a charming party and I enjoyed

it the more for having his company. Mrs. Barbour asked me and all the family, brother included, to spend the next day socially with her and to pass the evening. She always receives company on Saturday evening. We agreed.

Brother seemed really charmed with Gouy r Barbour's eloquent and amusing conversation,—certainly few equal him in colloquial powers. Being engaged early in the evening at Mrs. Rush's, brother left us when we rose from table and we ladies retired to dress for the evening. You know Mrs. Barbour is almost as great a talker as myself, being both in very high spirits, which the girls declared were increased by champayne; we passed really a merry hour or two during the unceremonious ceremony of dressing. Between 7 and 8, the company began to assemble and tho' an uninvited and social meeting, the rooms were soon filled. Mr. Smith, for a wonder, made his appearance for a little while on his way to sup with the Typographical Society on its anniversary. Mr. Gales and 4 or 5 strange editors, mostly members of congress went with him and did not return until after twelve, when as all the company were gone, to beguile the time I was playing chess with Gouy r Barbour. Thus passed another most agreeable evening. We returned home, all of us in fine spirits. If I could, I would have gone on Wednesday to Mrs. Clay's drawing room, but Mr. Smith had an engagement in the city and I gave it up. However, we were as happy at home, sitting round a cheerful fire and reading English history and sewing, so much interested in the adventures of Prince Charles, that we could not close the book until past 11 o'clock.

The social whirl was festive and sometimes exhausting. Parents worried about their socialite daughters who wore themselves out with "late hours and continued excitement." Older people shook their heads at young ladies whose conversation was filled with gossip instead of proper literary or cultural topics. Young gentlemen also caused raised eyebrows. One citizen noted that after a party they "would meet again at some oyster-house to go out on a lark. Singing, or rather shouting, popular songs, they would break win-

dows, wrench off knockers, call up doctors, and transpose signboards."

Card playing, especially among the ladies, horseracing at one of the city's several racecourses, and attending the theater were other pastimes enjoyed by the "better sort" of people. Promenading about the grounds of the White House or Capitol while listening to the music of the Marine Band was another favorite amusement of these well-to-do social leaders.

The city's white elite was, however, more than a crowd of flashy socialites. Through their work in commerce, banking, journalism, education, religion, and politics, they gave Washington City at least some of the vision it needed to change from town into city. Through their commitments to helping the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the insane, and, in a few instances, the enslaved, these privileged men and women also made their city a more humane place in which to live.

Washington's free black society had its own elite. Although a small number of people belonged to this elite, it was still a highly influential group. Moral and religious leadership, rather than great wealth or political power, characterized the African American elite. This small group was better educated than most other African Americans and thirsted after more schooling.

One representative of the black elite was the Rev. John R. Cook, whose achievements in the face of serious obstacles were astonishing. Cook took over a private school in 1834, renamed it the Union Seminary, and improved its course of study until it was equal to a high school. When he became impatient with racial discrimination in the Presbyterian Church, he founded the Fifteenth Street Church, the city's first black church of that denomination. The Rev. Cook became its original minister.

John F. Cook held up high standards for the black community. He worked to educate African American youngsters, to elevate the community's morals, and to encourage discipline through the Young Men's Moral and Literary Society, which he also organized. Like other members of Washington's black elite and the black leadership in other American cities, Cook participated in national affairs. Barred from politics by his color, Cook nevertheless took part in the national black convention movement, opposed colonization—the sending of African Americans to Africa—and supported the abolition of slavery. He sympathized with and worked



The Rev. John F. Cook was a leader of Washington's African American community. The following are excerpts from his journal.

- What conclusions about John F. Cook's life can you draw by reading these excerpts?

Monday, April 15, 1850

Day fine but cool after a frosty morning. Arose as usual, washed & private & family devotion breakfast & Called by to see the baby, well & School 60 scholars in behaviour tolerable, not very well, good deal interrupted worked through by 3 o'clock. Then went to Mrs. Burches to attend funeral of infant child Reuben Patterson went out to Rock Creek burial ground & back, pleasant ride. Called by Virginia's—then by Mrs. Harrison's then to Rachels—took tea sat till 10 then feeling fatigued walked home read devotion study, wrote, pri-

vate devotion & retire about 12 o'clock. Pill Wrote a letter to Presbytery today.

Tuesday, April 16th, 1850

Day clear & cool after a frosty morning. Arose as usual, shaved washed & private & family devotions, breakfast & Ploughman called see about ploughing lot & Called by see baby—well. School 65 scholars in behaviour good. Received a letter from Mr. Malony to day and answered it. Wrote inscription for wifes tombstone. Carried it down to stone cutters shop & then to Domes, then Farnums & back home & then to Mrs. Jenny Washington, saw Miss Mary Jane Washington married, then home tea & then Lodge till 10½ home about 11. Read till near one, wrote devotion & retire about 1.

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on behalf of the city's poor free blacks and slaves. Other black leaders in Washington had similar interests. Despite economic and social handicaps, the black elite built schools, churches, and an enduring community support system.

Middle-Class Washingtonians

Greater in numbers, if not in influence, than the elite were members of the middle class. The middle level of Washington society was made up of lesser government clerks; shopkeepers; teach-

- How did travelers reach Washington City in the early 1800s?

ers; proprietors of boardinghouses, restaurants, and saloons; foremen; bookkeepers; and office clerks at the city's banks and other businesses. They worked hard to get ahead and were often uncertain about the future.

Alfred M. Badger, who lived in the District from 1831 to 1833, was typical of the white middle-class Washingtonian. He worked as a clerk at Mr. Libbey's lumberyard, located near the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal below Bridge Street, now M Street, in Georgetown. With an income of \$500 a year, he was able to rent a house for himself and his wife and could afford a servant to help his wife, Grace, with the cooking and cleaning.

The Badger family's amusements were few and cheap. Typically they entertained friends in their house with tea, cakes, and "music on the pianoforte and harp." Sometimes they went for a "gig" (buggy) ride across town to the Eastern Branch, or out to Bladensburg for fresh spring water "called the best in the country." Now and then there was a camp meeting—a religious revival—to

Invitations to a "sitting party" and a "social supper."

• What was the purpose of the party being given by Alexander Taverns?

Washington City, January 26, 1846.

Your company is respectfully solicited to a select *SITTINO PARTY*, to be given by *Alexander Taverns*, for the purpose of purchasing his sister, *E. H. Bell*, of Alexandria. The above-mentioned Tea Party will take place on Thursday the 5th of February, at the Assembly Rooms, first floor, on Louisiana Avenue, near Sixth street; a band of sacred music is engaged for the occasion.

Tickets of admission Fifty Cents, to be purchased of the Managers and friends, and at the door. A permit is secured for the evening.

N. B. The proprietor would inform his friends and the public that he will spare no pains to render every comfort to those who may patronize him.

MANAGERS.

WILLIAM SLADE,
THOMAS CLARK,
J. T. JOHNSON,
ANDREW FOOTE,
JOHN FREEMAN,
CHARLES SHORTER.

JAMES A. HIGGINS,
DAVID FISHER,
ANTHONY BROWN,
CHARLES D. JONES,
JOHN T. COLEMAN,
R. S. S. OLIVER.

JAMES H. FLEET.



A SOCIAL SUPPER.

The honor of your company is respectfully solicited at a Supper to be given by Mrs. TATE, at Ladies' Hall, on Thursday the 13th of November. Her Friends are earnestly invited to attend, as nothing shall be wanting to render them comfortable.

Tickets admitting a Gentleman and Lady, \$1
Single Tickets, 50 cents.

MANAGERS.

M. DUNLOP, B. BROWN.
T. COSTIN, J. GREEN.

A permit has been secured for the evening.

10 Nov: 1851.

attend, or some occasion like a Fourth of July parade and fireworks. Badger "was very much pleased" with the two plays he and his wife saw at the theater one fall night in 1832, "after which we walked home and had some chocolate and something to eat as that is the fashion." Badger also spent time trying to paint pictures and was a member of the Western Star Engine Company, a group of volunteer fire fighters.

Free blacks who acquired property and even a degree of wealth made up the African American middle class. Its numbers included a few teachers and businessmen who, with their families, gave substance to the middle class and support to the elite of educators and religious leaders in the black community. The census of 1860 revealed several black Washingtonians of means. Alfred Lee, a feed merchant, possessed \$31,000 in land and personal property. Ann Costin, a seamstress, had \$6,000 in real estate, and John Gibson, a fisherman, had property valued at \$13,200. They and others worked hard, used their talents, saved, and lifted themselves into the middle class. Scores of free blacks in Washington became property owners and homeowners.

The Laboring Class

- *Who were Washington's poor people?*
- *What were their lives like?*

The majority of Washington's employed people probably belonged to the laboring class. The white men who worked on the city's building projects; manned its mills, forges, rope-walks, warehouses, and factories; drove its carts; fished for herring and shad in the rivers; or worked on barges, flatboats, and ships made up the white laboring class. They lived in various neighborhoods, usually near the places where they worked. They could seldom afford decent housing. They might live in cheap boardinghouses but more likely lived in one- or two-room frame dwellings or one-room shacks.

The poorest of worker families were poor indeed. Most people confined to the city's jails and workhouses were from the laboring classes. Youngsters who grew up in these families sometimes joined street gangs. A few, saving a penny here and there or receiving help from the city, sent their children to the free school available to poor families. Most of the city's children did without schooling, however. Members of the working class often learned how to help each other through neighborliness—joining together to overcome obstacles. They also combined forces in their churches and in the labor unions they sometimes formed.

SCHEDULE 1.—Free INHABITANTS enumerated by me, on the 1st day of June, 1850.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Serial number of individual	Family number	The Name of every Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	Age	Sex	Color, black, or mulatto	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate owned.	Place of Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within the year.	Attended School within the year.	Whether deaf, dumb, idiotic, insane, or convict.	
1		Louisa Williams	15	F				D.C.				
2		Lucas Williams	13	F				D.C.				
3		Leith Williams	8	F				D.C.				
4		Samuel Williams	12	M				D.C.				
5	679	Edward Ambush	50	M		Laborer		D.C.				
6		Elizabeth Ambush	50	F				D.C.				
7		John Thomas	22	M				D.C.				
8		John Thomas	5	M				D.C.				
9		Joseph Ambush	14	M				D.C.				
10	680	John Rogers	49	M		Laborer	200	D.C.				
11		John Rogers	25	M				D.C.				
12		Maria Rogers	16	F				D.C.				
13		John Rogers	13	M				D.C.				
14		John Rogers	13	M				D.C.				
15	681	J. N. Day	39	M		Laborer	500	D.C.				
16		Louisa Day	36	F				D.C.				
17		Louisa Day	11	F				D.C.				
18		Frederick Bell	45	M		Crocker		D.C.				
19	682	John Rogers	50	M		Laborer		D.C.				

As historians become more interested in the daily lives of ordinary people, they need to gather information from unusual sources. To write about Edward Ambush, the authors of this book used these and other documents, which Dorothy Provine of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., helped to collect.

- What are these documents, and what information can you get from them?

Last Will and Testament
Edward Ambush

In the name of God! I, Edward Ambush of Washington D.C. being of sound mind and memory yet realizing the uncertainty of life & the importance of arranging my temporal concerns and so far, as in my power, settling my worldly affairs, do commit my soul to God leaving this, through the ministry of James Schmitt, Deacon of the Baptist Church, through the ministry of James Schmitt, Deacon of the Baptist Church, and have at home in that world where persons never come of the any more enter — I now dispose of my property and follow.

It is my desire that my just debts should be paid (not including money then, any liability claimed against me on account of notes or contracts signed in the which my name had been signed by any other person (themselves) and especially my funeral expenses.

I will & bequeath unto my beloved wife my house & lot called my homestead where I now live and my lot fronting on the alley to my faithful son Joseph.

And to my wife I give my personal property.

Witness my hand and the seal of the undersigned this 18th day of February 1850.

Edward Ambush

James Schmitt

Most free black people, like their white counterparts, worked with their hands as laborers, craftsmen, and fishermen. African American workers held most of the city's service jobs. Black men and women managed Washington's hackney coaches, served its tables, ran its messages, cooked its food, and poured its drinks.

One interesting example of the life of a black working-class family is provided by the story of Edward Ambush. Ambush was probably born as a slave in Maryland about 1800 and was eventually purchased by Timothy Andrews, a resident of Washington City. In

1829 Andrews agreed that Ambush could have his freedom whenever he paid \$150 for it. By 1841, Ambush, through working his own time, had accumulated the money to buy his freedom and was duly set free by James McClery, a successor master to Timothy Andrews. Later records show Ambush listed as a laborer with a wife, Elizabeth, and a 14-year-old son, Joseph. The Ambushes lived in a home at 348 15th Street, NW. Ambush had struggled and survived as a free man and family head.

Ambush's will was recorded in February 1864. After commending his soul to God, Ambush ordered that upon his death all his "just debts" be paid. To his "beloved wife" he willed "my house and lot called my homestead where I now live." He left another lot to his son, while the rest of his personal property went to his wife. This property included furniture, other household items, and a large family Bible worth \$20.

This will depicts a dramatic change in the life of a man and his family. Born a slave, Edward Ambush had bought his freedom and acquired property. Although modest, his accomplishments represented the lives of many free blacks in Washington. Ambush signed his will in 1864 with an "X." Like many in the city, both black and white, he could not write his own name.

Slaves

Slaves represented the least privileged group in Washington's social and economic life. Washington's slaves occupied an unfortunate position. A majority were unable to purchase their freedom. As slaves, they were punished with greater severity than free persons convicted of the same crimes. They could also be sold whenever and wherever their masters wished, a fact of life that made marriages, friendships, work relations, and other human ties uncertain and temporary. In addition, the active slave trade in the city served to remind slaves that they belonged to another person and might one day find themselves in chains bound for "hell" in another, more southern place.

Yet slaves in the capital had possibilities for freedom unknown to most plantation slaves and equalled only by bondsmen in such cities as Baltimore and St. Louis. Many slaves worked, as Edward Ambush did, to buy their freedom. Others took advantage of the chance to disappear into one of the capital's scattered black neighborhoods, mingling with free black people and eventually passing for free.

3. Patterns of Change

Neighborhoods

Washington remained a city of neighborhoods, but the population was filling up old residential sections and expanding into new areas. Growth continued in such districts as the Navy Yard, Capitol Hill, the central city, and the White House-Lafayette Square section. By 1860, nearly 10,000 people lived in southwest Washington, distributed unevenly over the Island, as the neighborhood was called. One new neighborhood that grew fashionable between 1820 and 1860 was the Judiciary Square residential section near 4th, 5th, and D Streets, NW. Built up with handsome brick row-houses, the area attracted prominent government officials and businesspeople.

The area called Foggy Bottom, situated in northwest Washington near the Potomac River, became one of Washington's few industrial neighborhoods. Before the capital's establishment, it had been laid out as the Village of Hamburg by a German promoter from Maryland. Until the 1850s, Foggy Bottom grew slowly, but because it faced the river, wharves and a few factories were built. Rapid growth between 1850 and 1860 attracted new residents until the largest segment of the population consisted of unskilled working people. In 1856, the Washington Gas Light Company built a plant at New Hampshire and Virginia Avenues. Breweries, a glass factory, and building materials firms also located here. Workers and their families arrived and occupied tenements and humble dwellings near where they worked.

Another neighborhood of working people, known as "Swampoodle," was located on low, damp land north of the U.S. Capitol near Tiber Creek. Two developments in the 1850s influenced its growth: the opening on North Capitol Street in 1856 of a private printing plant that in 1861 became the Government Printing Office, and construction of St. Aloysius Catholic Church in 1859. The printing industry attracted printers, binders, and other workers. St. Aloysius Church attracted Irish people. Later, when Tiber Creek was channeled underground, Swampoodle would expand and become home to other ethnic groups.

On the south side of the Anacostia River, still another community for workers—Uniontown—was laid out in 1854. This settlement, the capital's first suburb, appealed to artisans working in the Navy Yard on the north bank of the river. Thus the city expanded, neighborhood by neighborhood.

• Where were Washington's new neighborhoods?

• During which decades was Washington's growth particularly rapid?

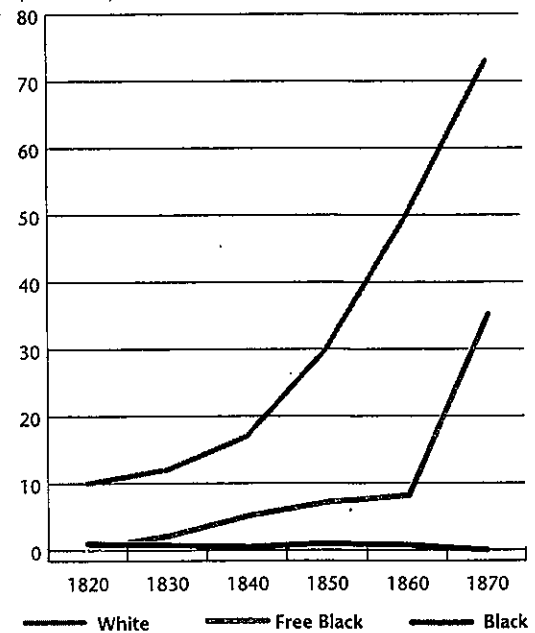
Population of Washington City and the District of Columbia, 1800-1870

Year	Washington City	District of Columbia
1800	3,210	14,093
1810	8,208	24,023
1820	13,117	33,039
1830	18,826	39,834
1840	23,364	43,712
1850	40,001	51,687
1860	61,122	75,080
1870	109,199	131,700

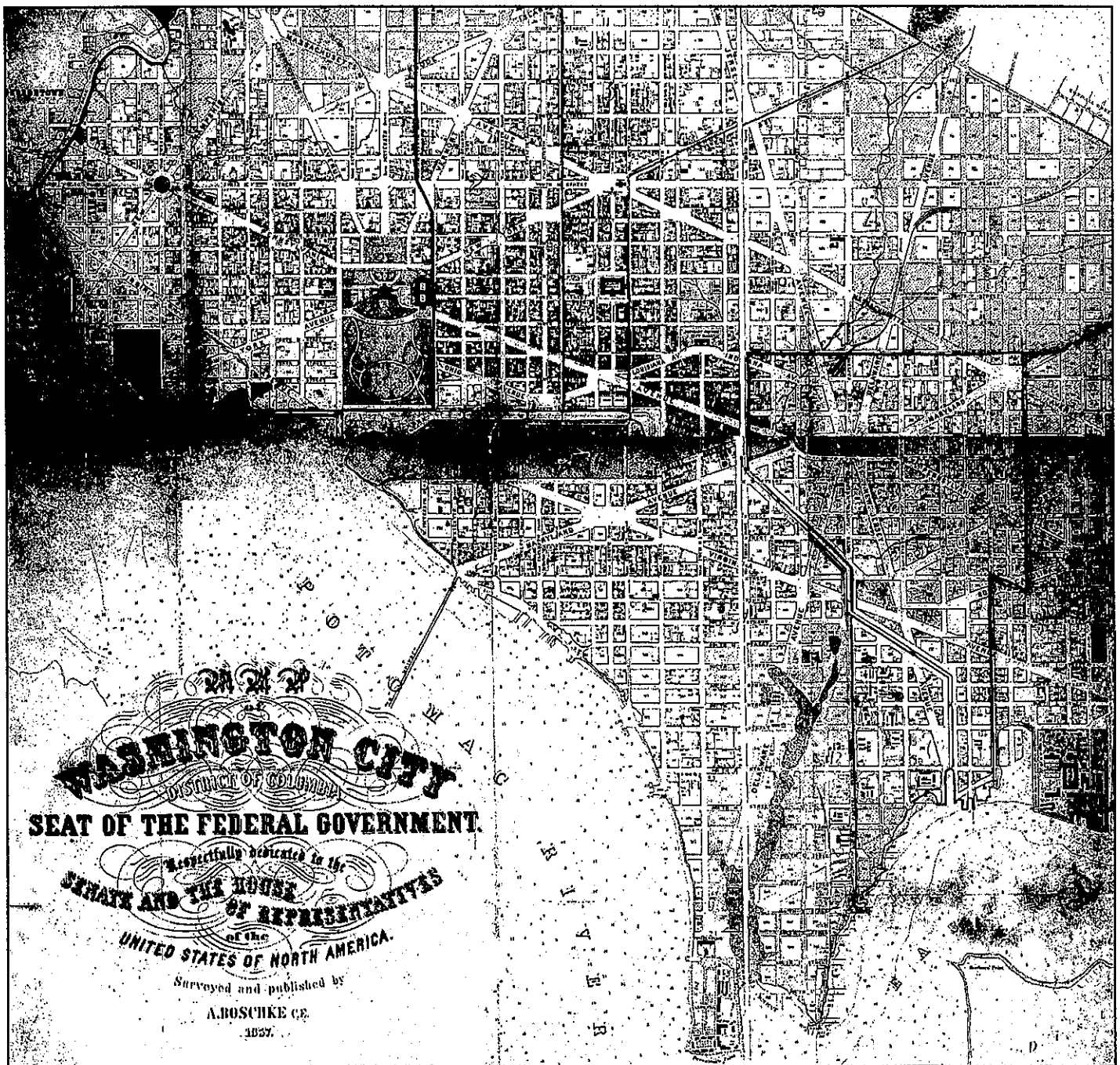
Source: U.S. Census, 1800-1870

Population of Washington City, 1820-1870

(in thousands)



Source: U.S. Census, 1800-1870



Map of Washington City by A. Boschke, 1857. The darker areas on the map represent the parts of the city that were built up in 1857.

- Compare this map with the one of 1801–1803 (page 50). In what directions was the city growing?

- What role did Washington's churches play in the city's early history?

Religious and Social Institutions

As Washington's populations grew in size and complexity, a network of social institutions developed. Churches, charitable associations, and social clubs increased in numbers and variety. Although not famous for its strict religious outlook, the capital attracted members of most traditional faiths. Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches, favored in Virginia and Maryland, were early on the cap-

ital scene. Christ Episcopal Church, near the Navy Yard, dates back to 1806, while St. Patrick's, the oldest and for years the only Catholic church in Washington City, had its beginnings in 1792. Newer, larger, and more stylish churches for the Unitarian (1822), Catholic (1838), Methodist (1815-1849), Episcopal (1849), Presbyterian (1859), and other denominations were constructed in the capital's central district. Some of these congregations became "mother churches" in their denominations, with offshoots in other residential neighborhoods. Churches often formed the basis for the social lives of their members.

Just as important as the churches for white people were those organized by black congregations. By 1860 there were at least eight African American churches in Washington. At the Mt. Zion Church in Georgetown, African Americans worshiped as early as 1814. In 1818 the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in Washington. The black members of Ebenezer Methodist Church in southeast Washington withdrew from the white church in 1826 because white pastors would not hold black children during baptism. They formed a new church called "Little Ebenezer." Other black congregations such as the 15th Street Presbyterian, the 19th Street Baptist, and the Asbury Methodist separated from white churches because they wanted freedom to control their own churches and worship in their own style. Their churches were centers of social life for Washington's free African Americans.

Churches or religious charitable societies provided much care for the poor and disabled. Some private organizations were formed specifically for charitable purposes. Under the leadership of Marcia Burnes Van Ness, the Washington Female Orphan Asylum was established in 1815. In 1828 it was enlarged into the Washington City Orphan Asylum, admitting both boys and girls to its orphanage near the present site of the Martin Luther King Library. In the 1830s the Washington Relief Society gave aid to "indigent and disabled emigrants"—mostly people from Ireland. The Female Union Benevolent Society, formed in 1838, gave particularly useful service. In 1844, for example, it provided food, clothing, and shelter for 300 families of workers laid off by the Navy Yard. The Guardian Society, founded in 1853, organized 300 "Guardians of the Poor," who volunteered time and money to help poor people find jobs and assistance.

Washingtonians also organized a variety of private associations

EVERY MAN A FREEHOLDER.
THE UNION LAND ASSOCIATION respectfully inform the public that they have taken up a TRACT OF LAND slightly situated at the junction of the Bridge road, Marlborough road, and the Piccadilly road, fronting on the river, directly opposite the Navy Yard, and commanding fine views of the city of Washington, and the Potomac River, which they intend laying out in BUILDING LOTS, to be located by ballot on the 1st of June next after which no Lots will be sold except at a much higher price. Persons desiring to purchase, should therefore make early application.
 The size of Lots are 24 feet front by 120 deep, all fronting on 60 feet wide streets, "at the very low price of \$60 each, without interest," payable in small monthly instalments, as follows: \$3 upon each lot upon subscribing, and \$3 for each lot every succeeding month, until the whole is paid, when a "good in fee simple" will be given to each lot-holder, clear of every incumbrance. The streets also will be graded and edged with shade trees, without extra charge to the lot holders.
 Purchasers have the privilege of exchanging (after the drawing) for any Lots that may remain unsold, by paying \$1 each lot extra, and can have two or more Lots together.
JOHN FOX, Secretary,
 Office 7th street, above D, op. Intelligence office.
 Open from 9 a. m. to 7 p. m. May 6-25

Uniontown was Washington's first suburb. This ad appeared in the *Evening Star* on May 17, 1854.

- Where was Uniontown?

such as the Masonic Order and the Odd Fellows for general sociability and special purposes. Masons conducted many of the ceremonies dedicating public buildings and monuments. On July 4, 1848, the cornerstone of the Washington Monument was laid with the Masonic Lodge of Washington in charge. The city's Odd Fellows conducted a grand parade in 1846 celebrating a businessmen's trade fair. Between 1820 and 1860 both Masonic and Odd Fellows organizations built temples and halls that served as locations for meetings, concerts, and other public events. Black mutual aid and benevolent societies were organized; the charitable work of the Prince Hall Masonic lodges of Washington was extensive. Men and women formed scores of other private societies for useful and recreational purposes. The Columbia Typographical Union, organized by skilled Washingtonians in the printing trades in 1815, was one of the nation's earliest workers' organizations.

Education

- *What problems did public education face in the federal city?*

Public education was not widespread in the South before the Civil War. As in other southern cities, efforts in Washington to establish public schools faced an uphill struggle. In 1829 about 5,200 white youngsters lived in Washington City. Of the 1,200 of these in school, most were boys and most were enrolled in private schools. Only 300, almost all boys, were receiving a basic education in Washington's two publicly supported schools. All secondary instruction was private and thus open only to children of well-off families or occasional charity students. Typical were two Catholic academies, the Convent of the Visitation in Georgetown, which gave an excellent education to daughters of well-to-do families, and Washington Seminary, later Gonzaga College, where Jesuit priests prepared young men for admission to Georgetown College.

During the 1840s, Mayor William Seaton led the city council in making changes in the city's school systems. A public school for white girls was opened in 1841 and in the next seven years two more schools, one near Judiciary Square and one on the Island in Southwest, were built. With the elimination of tuition charges, the schools became genuinely public schools rather than "pauper schools." Now they received support from a yearly \$1 tax on every voter in the city. Enrollment increased, and by the mid-1850s, 2,200 white boys and girls sat in the city's 24 schoolrooms and were taught by 37 teachers.

Improved as they were, the schools still had a long way to go before they approached the quality of public education in many New England and western cities where educational reformers had been at work. Two-thirds of Washington's white youths still were not in school. In some classrooms there were 70 pupils for one teacher. Teachers making \$500 or \$600 a year (low-level government clerks made twice that amount) were thought to be overpaid rather than underpaid by some city council members. Many public officials and taxpayers still regarded education as a luxury rather than a necessity.

Education of African American Children

Another major weakness of Washington's public schools was their failure to serve the African American population. The children of black parents were excluded by law from the public schools, despite the fact that taxes paid by black property owners were used to pay for education. From the start, Washington's African American community had to provide for the education of its own boys and girls. The first known school for black children opened in 1807, founded by unschooled black men. Later, in 1818, the Resolute Beneficial Society organized to provide poor relief and sponsor a school for the African American community.

After 1820, schools for black children multiplied. Henry Smothers's free school held its sessions in a building near the present site of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (13th Street and New York Avenue, NW). At times Smothers had as many as 100 students in his school. Later John Prout took over the Smothers school until he was succeeded by one of his former students, John F. Cook. At Cook's Union Seminary boys and girls were separated into different "departments" to study composition, the Bible, reading, recitation, morals, and hygiene. Several white churches had classes at night for African American adults who wanted to learn to read and write. Most Sunday schools had some black students, as did a few private schools. Because of white opposition, mixing of the races in schools ended in the 1830s, about the same time that white resistance to private schools for African American students also increased.

Proprietors of schools for black students responded to prejudice by teaching black pupils exclusively. Black teachers gave instruction at John Cook's Union Seminary, Arabella Jones's school for



MARCIA BURNES VAN NESS

She was one of the city's richest women, known as the "Heiress of Washington City." Marcia Burnes inherited a fortune from her father, David Burnes. On his farmlands the White House, the Treasury, and much of downtown Washington were later built. Burnes sold his land to the government and private purchasers for a great deal of money.

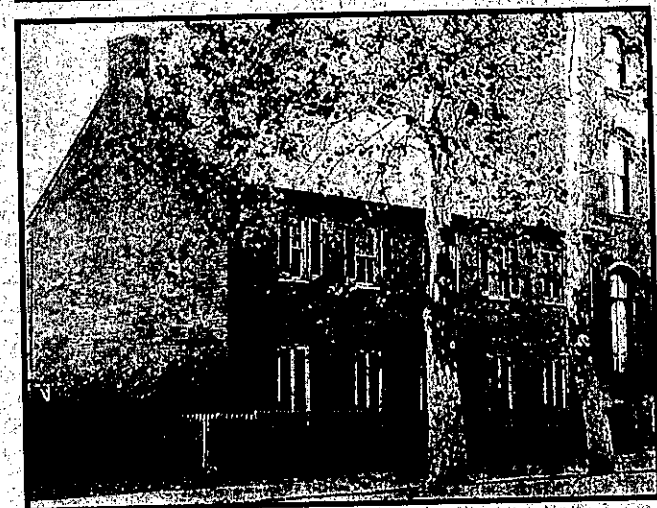
Marcia Burnes married John P. Van Ness, a wealthy member of Congress from New York, in 1802. The affluent couple became leaders in Washington's high society. The elegant Van Ness mansion, completed in 1816, was the scene of many great parties and entertainments. It stood where the Pan American Union building is today near 17th Street and Constitution Avenue.

Marcia Burnes Van Ness had a generous heart and worked for numerous charitable causes. She helped to found her favorite charity, the Washington City Female Orphan Asylum, in 1815. During the terrible cholera epidemic of 1832, she spent much time caring for sick people. Finally, exhausted, she herself became ill and died of cholera. Congress adjourned to attend the funeral, the first time it honored a woman in this way.

EDUCATION IN WASHINGTON

George Washington and the other founders of the capital hoped that the city would soon become a national center of education and cultural activities. The first president and many other leaders after him

proposed a great national university for the city. Unfortunately, until after the Civil War, higher education in the capital was not distinguished.



Eastern School (top) and Western School (bottom) were the first public schools in Washington.



The original building of Columbian College, built in 1821. Columbian College became George Washington University.



Myrtilla Miner's teaching was so good that some white Washingtonians feared that her students would be too well educated and that the city would become a national center of education for African Americans.

MISS WRIGHT'S SCHOOL.

INSTRUCTION in Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Geography, with the use of the Globes, History with Chronology, English Composition, Natural and Moral Philosophy, the French Language, &c. together with plain and ornamental Needle Work in all its varieties—

TEN DOLLARS per Quarter.

Fuel for the Winter, **TWO DOLLARS.**

Georgetown, August 13, 1827.

This ad for Mrs. Wright's School appeared in 1827.

girls on the Island, and Louisa Parke Costin's school on Capitol Hill. White people taught all-black classes at other schools such as the St. Vincent de Paul Free Catholic Colored School and the "high school" opened by the remarkable Miss Myrtilla Miner on New Hampshire Avenue below Dupont Circle in 1853. Miss Miner's school closed in 1861 because of her ill health and the Civil War.

The dream of a university at Washington remained only a dream. In 1815 Congress granted the Georgetown Seminary a charter to award degrees, but even as a college it remained chiefly a training school for Catholic priests. In 1821 a college building was erected on land at Columbia Heights just north of the city limits between 14th and 15th Streets. Called Columbian College and sponsored by the Baptist denomination, this school had neither the broad appeal nor the learned curriculum to serve as a university.

Cultural Life

There was not much serious cultural activity in Washington City's early years. The city's best music probably came from the Marine Band, which included several Italian musicians specifically brought to America as performers. The band played at special occasions and parades and gave public concerts on the Capitol grounds. The Washington Theater, successor to the United States Theater, offered plays and entertainments during its season. In 1835 the first National Theatre was built near E and 13th Streets, NW (the present building is the sixth theater at this site), bringing better drama to the capital.

A handful of government scientists, engineers, and officials gave Washington society what intellectual tone it had. Not until the Smithsonian Institution was chartered in 1846 did the capital have much cultural distinction. We know the Smithsonian today as a huge complex of varied museums. In 1855, when the "Castle" building was finished, there were no museums. The oddly shaped building contained a few laboratories, study rooms, a library, a lecture hall, and living quarters for some of the scientists. Learned and popular lectures on scientific and literary subjects were offered. They drew the city's most talented residents to the Smithsonian lecture hall.

Recreation

Most people took their recreation in simple ways. Social life centered in the home, neighborhoods, social clubs, and formal

- *What were cultural and recreational life like in early Washington?*

FOR REVIEW

1. Write a paragraph description of what Washington looked like around 1840. Be specific.

2. Write one or two sentences about how each of these words or phrases relates to the people who lived in the nation's capital around 1840.

Washington's white elite the black middle class

Washington's black elite the laboring class

the white middle class the slaves

3. Review the population chart and the graph of Washington's population between 1800-1870. Write a brief paragraph to describe how the number of slaves and free African Americans changed in this period. Make a bar graph to show the change.

4. On a map of Washington locate the neighborhoods known as the Island, Judiciary Square, Foggy Bottom, Swampoodle, and Uniontown. Where were these neighborhoods in relation to the Navy Yard, Capitol Hill, and the center of the city?

5. Describe the role of the churches in Washington. Do churches today still perform these same functions?

6. Develop a chronology for the development of educational facilities for African American young people in Washington. Begin with 1807 and end with 1861.

BE CREATIVE

Pretend you are a newspaper reporter for a paper in Boston in 1861. Write a one-page story for your paper describing your visit to the nation's capital, how it looks, and who lives there. Your article might be called: "Washington: The Look and Life of the City."

OR

Write a letter to a friend from the point of view of one type of person who lived in Washington. Tell about your life in Washington. Make it clear how your life is affected by your race and your economic status.

associations. Men could find lively company in taverns, barrooms, and gambling halls. Young men often formed friendships in their neighborhoods. The city's best-known place of entertainment was Carusi's Assembly Rooms at 11th and C Streets, NW. Carusi's rooms became a place for music, dancing, and performances. It was one of the few locations in Washington where an inaugural ball or other festivity could be held. The Federal Triangle now stands in massive splendor where Carusi's music once played. For many years, before the tidal flats were filled, Washingtonians hunted and fished within the city limits.

Because most black families either would not be permitted service or could not afford to visit the city's restaurants or theaters, the African American community made its own recreation. Surviving evidence suggests that a lively folk culture existed among the slaves and free blacks that enriched their working lives and leisure time.

For most of its residents, Washington City was not a very exciting or sophisticated place. The unfinished city had not yet become beautiful, but it was thought to have charm by many people who called it home. Life was generally relaxed, and in the mid-nineteenth century it was quite a good place to live. Like all American cities, however, it suffered from many problems associated with rapid growth.